Centering Justice in Introductory American Government Courses

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One of the core responsibilities of modern American universities is to prepare students for their role in the American democratic system. Often this responsibility is directed to Political Science and its general education offering of introductory American Government courses. The organization of syllabi and textbooks has changed very little over time and offers a piecemeal survey of institutions, processes, and developments that can culminate in an impression of the American system as a monolith very slow to change. This can be disengaging for today's college students who are already familiar with the content and desire to see change in the political system.

This paper highlights an alternative organization of traditional American Government content framed around justice rather than institutions. Justice is conceptualized as covering rights, responsibilities, procedures, and fairness. Justice is presented as a core value of American democracy and a lens through which democratic performance and output can be evaluated. A central theme is the responsibility we each hold to pursue justice when it is absent. The strategies of successful, and unsuccessful, social justice movements are featured to help students build a democratic toolkit they can engage when they encounter an issue they want to change. The overarching course goal is to help students view democratic institutions as opportunities rather than obstacles.

This paper features a comparison of the justice course syllabus with the American Government textbook assigned by traditional course sections at the same institution. It highlights the shared content, terms, theories, events, and documents presented in both courses, but offers an alternative frame for meeting those learning objectives. Assignments are described that require students to reconcile the justice-oriented goals and outcomes of public policy decisions. The paper concludes with general recommendations on centering justice in political science courses curated from ten years teaching in a multi-disciplinary Justice Studies department.

Justice in American Society

I teach in an interdisciplinary Justice Studies Department. Students can pursue a general Justice Studies major or select an emphasis from Criminology and Criminal Justice, Global Justice and Policy, or Social Justice Interventions. Justice is conceptualized by our department as covering rights, responsibilities, procedures, and fairness. Our department offers JUST 225: Justice in American Society as its general education contribution. Students must take one course to fulfill the American Experience requirement: JUST 225, US History, or American Government. Although offered by different departments, the three courses share learning objectives and assessment mechanisms. Students completing an American Experience course will be able to identify, conceptualize and evaluate:

- Social and political processes and structures using quantitative and qualitative data.
- Primary sources from diverse perspectives relating to American history, political institutions and society.
- The evolution of intellectual concepts shaping American democratic institutions, including issues involving power, inequity, and justice.
- The complexity and diversity of American politics, society and culture.
- Intentions and consequences of America's engagement in global affairs.
- How the historical exclusion of various social identities influences political, social, cultural and economic development.

When I joined this interdisciplinary department, I converted my previously taught American Government course into Justice in American Society. This obviously meant more philosophy and criminal justice, but also an increased emphasis on social justice movements and their relationship with American institutions. As a political scientist, I could not abandon the theories, concepts, processes, and events that are important to understanding American government. I just needed to reframe their presentation. Over time, I have noticed pedological advantages to this reframe that might be useful to others teaching courses on US government.

Traditional American Government Courses

Political Science traditionally offers an introduction to US Government course as its contribution to general education. The last thirty years witnessed historical lows in youth political engagement and declarations of concern by political scientists, media, and politicians. Consensus built that the field of Political Science has a responsibility to not only teach civics, but to prepare citizens who are eager to engage their democracy. Bennion and Laughlin (2018) summarize the efforts by colleges and the American Political Science Association to reorient civics instruction to civic and political engagement goals. If the responsibility to renew civic life falls on political scientists, the introduction to American government classroom is where it will happen.

The course surveys the evolution of American political institutions and processes. The institutions and processes often organize courses and textbooks: The Founding, Federalism, Congress, Judicial Branch, the Presidency, Political Parties, and Elections. Texts can include chapters on civil rights, public opinion, the media, and interest groups. Stroup and Garriott (1997) assert that textbooks (and the courses organized around them) have changed very little since Ogg and Ray's Introduction to American Government published in 1922. They argue that problems with the piecemeal approach to institutions and processes amplify as textbooks provide a static snapshot of American politics without paying attention to changing political and cultural contexts. This presentation is familiar to students as their social studies and civics course in high school likely followed a similar model. Instructors might run into an "attitude of knowingness" where students think they have little to learn and are not open to the idea (Lear 1998). It can also leave the student with an impression that the American social contract is set rather than continually renegotiated.

Several studies on college level introductory to US government textbooks find a hegemonic presentation of American history and politics as primarily involving white, able-

bodied men (Wallace and Allen 2008). Olivo's (2012) study found that on average less than 10 percent of a text's pages included in-text references to women. Wallace and Allen's (2008; 2010) work finds that the visual presentations of African Americans in textbooks reinforce rather than challenge racial stereotypes. Takeda (2015; 2016) notes that the minimal references to Asian Pacific Americans that exist in texts simply reproduce the "model minority" stereotype. Novkov and Gossett (2007) record that LGBTQ+ mentions are regulated to chapters on civil rights and often as an addendum to detailed coverage of the Civil Rights Movement. Gen Z is more racially and ethnically diverse than any previous generation (Pew 2020). Students need to see people they identify with as powerful political actors in order to internalize their own democratic potential.

Justice in American Society shares the goal of increasing civic preparation and participation but reframes the presentation to seem more relevant to their lives. Abandoning the standard textbook allows me to more easily fit current events into lectures. Students seem eager to have space to process and dialogue political events that they may not understand. I curate course readings from a variety of primary and secondary sources with the intent to represent diverse voices. In the following section, I outline how I reframe the presentation of important American Government concepts to be more justice centric.

Content Comparison

The first column of Table 1 displays the table of contents from Christine Barbour and Gerald C. Wright's *Keeping the Republic* (Ninth Edition, 2021) textbook that is assigned in some sections of US Government at my institution. The paperback version of this text costs students $90 and the eBook is $75.40 at our campus bookstore. The text follows the standard approach to American government noted above. The second column shows the weekly themes I utilize in JUST 225. Course materials include historical documents, primary sources, academic research

articles, news stories, podcast episodes, and films. There is a Canvas module for each theme. The current cost of materials for the course is zero dollars.

Table 1: Content Schedule	
Keeping the Republic **(Ninth Edition) by Barbour and Wright**	**JUST 225 Syllabus Schedule**
Ch 1: Power and Citizenship in American Politics	Introducing Justice
Ch 2: The Politics of the American Founding	Theories of Justice
Ch 3: Federalism	Ethics and Human Behavior
Ch 4: Fundamental American Liberties	Crime and Punishment
Ch 5: Struggle for Equal Rights	Restorative Justice
Ch 6: Congress	Political Institutions
Ch 7: The Presidency	Native Americans
Ch 8: The Bureaucracy	Racial Justice
Ch 9: The American Legal System and the Courts	Feminism
Ch 10: Public Opinion	SOGIE
Ch 11: Parties and Interest Groups	Disability Justice
Ch 12: Voting, Campaigns, and Elections	Working Class
Ch 13: Media, Power, and Political Communication	International Role
Ch 14: Domestic and Foreign Policy	Immigration

The assigned readings are often edited before each semester. Some remain constant (examples include the Constitution, the Seneca Falls Declaration of Sentiments, and an excerpt from Thomas Hobbes' *State of Nature*) while others adjust to current events. For example, in Spring 2023, I removed a *BBC* article from the Native American module that highlighted Lissa Yellowbird-Chase, an enrolled member of the Mandan, Hidatsa and Arikara Nation, who addresses a criminal justice gap by personally searching for missing indigenous persons throughout the US. With a Supreme Court decision in *Haaland v. Brackeen* due in June 2023, it is important for the students to read about Indian Child Welfare Act and the arguments made in the court case (particularly concerning whether the Court will treat Native American identity as a racial category and those implications). I also assigned a section from the Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative Investigative Report released in May 2022.

At first glance (like in Table 1), the courses appear to have very little in common. Our Political Institutions week is the most obvious connection, and it could include the content of at

least five of the Barbour and Wright chapters. In Table 2, I list the concepts, theories, and processes from Introduction to American Government that I cover during the JUST 225 weekly themes. Some concepts appear multiple times to reinforce concepts. In the following paragraphs, I demonstrate these connections using two examples from class.

Table 2: Sample of Shared Concepts covered in JUST 225

Introducing Justice	Alternative political and economic systems; Ideal democracy; Legitimate authority; Political equality; Political culture; Sources of political conflict; Procedural justice; Democratic values
Theories of Justice	Social contract theory; Rights; Responsibilities; Sovereignty; Popular sovereignty; Revolution; First Amendment; Equal Protection Clause; Compelling state interest test
Ethics and Human Behavior	Natural law; Individual liberties v Collective goals; Political socialization
Crime and Punishment	Policy making process; Agenda setting; Criminal Law; Bill of Rights; Precedents; Power of judiciary; Federalism; Polling; Due Process; Issue Ownership
Restorative Justice	Responsibility; Implications of public policy; Crimes against the state; Reforming criminal justice system
Political Institutions	Elections; Constitution; Gerrymandering; Incumbency advantage; Campaign finance laws; Law making process; Plurality elections; Political parties; Veto; Electoral college
Native Americans	Judiciary; Legal personality; Collective action problem; Descriptive representation; Bureaucracy; Policy motivations and implications; Compelling state interest test
Racial Justice	Civil Rights; De Jure and de facto discrimination; Jim Crow; Racism; Issue ownership; Mass incarceration; Affirmative action
Feminism	ERA; Amending the Constitution; Wage gap; Descriptive representation
SOGIE	Mass media; Civil rights; Federalism; Judicial review; Constructionism; Interpretivism
Disability Justice	Law making process; Agenda setting; Representative policy making
Working Class	Distributive justice; Unionization; New Deal; Executive orders; Social welfare policies; Progressive and regressive taxes
International Role	Interventionism; Isolationism; Head of gov versus head of state; Treaty ratification; International organizations; Foreign policy actors; Immigration

For a first example, during the module on Native Americans, we discuss race and ethnicity, treaty making and treaty obligations, policy phases in the relationship with the federal government including the state motivation behind each phase, and specific policy examples and implications like the General Allotment Act (Dawes Act) of 1887. We define self-determination

and explore the reauthorization process of the Violence Against Women Act. With this semester's new readings, we will discuss the role of schools in nation-building, colonization, and assimilation. We will revisit suspect classification and the compelling state interest test first introduced during our theories of justice week. If the Supreme Court rules in *Haaland v. Brackeen* that Native identity should be treated like race and thus a suspect class, will states be able (or willing) to meet the compelling state interest test on differential treatment of Native Americans? Is it possible for a state to have a compelling state interest in preserving distinct nations within the state rather than encouraging assimilation? This would have major implications for adoption policies, but also criminal justice jurisdiction, health care, education, and reparation efforts. Many of these concepts and processes are presented on the pages of American government textbooks, but connecting the implications for today are dependent on the instructor.

Another example draws from a major content difference between the two courses. In American Government textbooks, the criminal justice system is primarily discussed in terms of constitutional protections provided to the accused. This interests students, but they also want to understand George Floyd and Tyre Nichols. Given the nature of the Justice Studies major, Justice in American Society spends two modules on the criminal justice system (Crime and Punishment and Restorative Justice in Table 2) and returns to it during the Racial Justice module to discuss mass incarceration and policy brutality. I have no criminology training so when preparing these subjects, I leaned into my criminology colleagues and my political science background.

I begin the semester by introducing different forms and theories of justice. We then discuss social contract theory, characteristics of an ideal democracy, and important values to American democracy. That is followed by a discussion of ethics and how we evaluate actions as

right or wrong. This sets us up for the criminal justice portion of the course. In the following paragraphs, I highlight examples of where I bring American government content into our criminal justice lectures.

We begin by asking why we criminalize certain behaviors but not others. I present mala in se vs mala prohibita crimes and two theories of criminal law formation (conflict and consensus). I also dive into the concept of federalism as we discuss why states criminalize different behaviors. I teach about the advantages and disadvantages of the federal system. Packer's two models of values in the criminal justice system (Due Process and Crime Control) provide the perfect framing for teaching about policy goals, issue ownership, the judicial system, and the protections afforded by due process and the Constitution. I use an assignment where students evaluate proposed criminal justice reforms according to whether they fall into the Due Process or Crime Control model.

Federalism comes up again as we discuss the death penalty and its status and application in different states. I use this topic to teach about the Supreme Court, judicial review, and the appellate process. I also spend time teaching about polling using this topic. We look at public support for the death penalty across time as well as how support varies with question formatting. I use an assignment that requires students to make an argument for or against the death penalty using research from credible sources with justice as the desired outcome. I find students come into the class with a position on this topic but have not really explored the foundations of their position.

I also teach restorative justice as one possible alternative to our retributive system. We cover the goals of punishment and reflect on whether the US accomplishes its goals. We return to the criminal justice system a few weeks later when we cover racial justice. In addition to the teaching of the Civil Rights Movement, we investigate contemporary movements for racial

justice. We learn strategies of nonviolence and social movement theory including the collective action problem. As I teach other social justice movements in the weeks that follow, we intentionally build a set of strategies for affecting social change. I approach this portion of the course understanding that not every student is invested in every movement we discuss, but that they each have, or will have, something they want to see changed.

General Recommendations for Centering Justice

During graduate school, I did not picture myself in an interdisciplinary department. I was a political scientist, and I *did* political science. Ten years later I cannot imagine myself anywhere else. In the following paragraphs, I share some insights from my experience on bringing justice into the forefront of your courses.

Meet students where they are and bring in issues they care about. Today's traditional college student was born after 9/11. The US has been involved in military conflict their entire lives. Their school experience included lockdown drills alongside physical education. One of the early assignments in my course asks them to identify the most pressing justice issue in the US and use course theories to explain why it is unjust. Since summer 2020, at minimum, a third of students identify racial justice issues as most pressing (at our predominantly white institution). This semester another third identified reproductive rights. I find that students are not particularly well informed about current events, but they are paying attention. And they need us to provide space for them to process, learn, and dialogue with others. My courses are intentionally responsive to current events. It requires more prep time than one would expect for the Nth iteration of a course, but I find it well worth it in student engagement and feedback.

Let go of the textbook. A professor in my graduate program once advised that you can confidently teach any course by assigning one textbook to the students and using a different textbook to prepare your lectures. There are currently seven active courses in my teaching

portfolio, and I assign a textbook in only one of them. Even in that course, I heavily supplement the text with curated readings from a variety of sources. The cost of textbooks is a heavy burden, and an inclusive syllabus avoids adding to that burden. Our library leases my one assigned textbook through JSTOR so it is free for students. I do assign non-textbooks in my upper-division courses, but intentionally keep total text costs under $20 in all my courses.

Beyond cost, letting go of the textbook allows you to bring in diverse voices and perspectives. In addition to academic sources, I use news articles, podcast episodes, short films, blog posts, government and non-profit reports, and other modalities. Be careful that you aren't reinforcing stereotypes in the pieces you select. Present stories of power alongside stories of suffering. Stories are more powerful when told by those who experienced them. Why read about a changemaker when you can hear directly from them?

I also recommend reminding students often that they are not learning everything there is to know about a topic. Justice issues are complex and often politized. My goal is to provide students with a framework to evaluate their own beliefs on a subject. I am not concerned about their final position, but I want them to have considered why they hold that position. I want them to have the information literacy skills needed to assess incoming information, process it, and reflect on their positions.

Emphasize capacity for social change. We don't all agree on the most pressing problems facing our world, but all the issues seem daunting. It is difficult to cultivate efficacy when solutions seem impossible. One strategy I use for overcoming this is to highlight the local. I often frame our campus as their most local space and the place where they have the greatest potential for change. The skills needed to change campus policy are the same required to change public policy. For example, a former student from my general education course is meeting with Board of Visitors members on expanding foreign language offerings and requirements to include sign

language. In working with this student, our research uncovered that state law required public universities to recognize sign language, and our institution was non-compliant and had been for years. The student is leveraging legal protections, advocating for herself and others, and making the university more accessible and inclusive.

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